IBM Middleware

Software Review: StarOffice 6.0

By
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By Kevin Savetz

Living without Microsoft Office is easier said than done. Whether you're a conscientious objector to using Microsoft's software or simply can't afford to shell out hundreds of dollars per workstation for an office suite, the trick is finding a viable alternative. StarOffice 6.0 may be it. Sun's productivity suite includes a word processor, spreadsheet, presentation creation tool, drawing application, and database.

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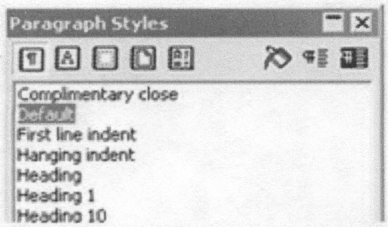
The word processor, Writer, is as smart and capable as they come. It includes all the features typical users need, such as a spell checker and thesaurus, columnar text, tables, footnotes, and potent formatting tools. It can underline misspelled words as you type and offers automatic word completion, learning the words that you use. The spreadsheet application, Calc, could be Excel's long lost twin: its features include automatically completing a series of cells, easy chart generation, and a goal seeker tool.

StarOffice's presentation tool and vector-based drawing application (for creating two- and three-dimensional objects that can be quickly moved and resized) are similarly handy. Moving information between the applications is easy: you can create a graphic object in Draw and drop it into a presentation, or move a chart from a spreadsheet into a word processor document.



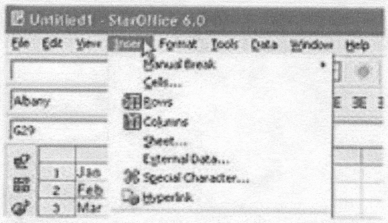
(Click on image to view full-size screenshot.)

Because the programs are well integrated, the tools available to you aren't limited by the application you're currently using. For instance, the spelling checker and auto-correct features aren't restricted to the word processor. Likewise, the Gallery, a respectable collection of clip art, backgrounds, and sounds, is available in all four applications.

If you've used another office suite, you can jump right in to these applications. They're probably not identical to the applications you're used to — a command might be under a different menu, for instance — but they're intuitive enough to use without spending much time

with the manual. If you do need help, the online help is speedy and thorough.

All four applications use open, XML file formats, which keeps data files small and compatible across platforms. The applications can also read and write files that are compatible with Word, Excel, PowerPoint, and WordPerfect. Although this generally works well, StarOffice occasionally had trouble with the formatting of complex text documents and presentations.



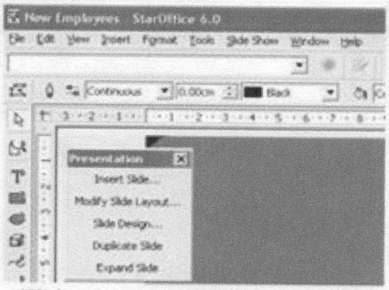
(Click on image to view full-size screenshot.)

StarOffice's database component is a disappointment. With a separate installer and all but ignored in the manual, it lacks the polish and integration shared by the other applications. That's because the database is actually Adabas D, a third-party application that is also available as a free download. It's a "personal edition" that is limited to 100 MB of data space. It's not a bad program, but it feels out of place in StarOffice.

It's worth noting that StarOffice 6 has dropped several features from the last major version 5.2, including a Web browser, e-mail and Usenet clients, and a scheduler application. The deletions are a good thing, throwing away the "kitchen sink" approach in favor of focusing on core productivity applications.

Available in downloadable and boxed versions, a single StarOffice license costs $75.95. Volume discounts for small businesses start at $60 for 25 users. (It's available for free to academic and research institutions.) The flexible license allows each user to install StarOffice on up to five computers. The price includes free support via phone and e-mail for 60 days. In addition, a Web-based training course offers tips for those making the transition from other suites.

A free version of the software is also available. OpenOffice.org is an open-source office suite based on StarOffice's code, but with a reduced selection of fonts, file filters, and document templates. The free version also lacks the database component, clip art library, printed documentation, and technical support.



(Click on image to view full-size screenshot.)

StarOffice is available for Windows (95 through XP), Linux, and Solaris. (Although there isn't a Mac version, a MacOS X version of OpenOffice.org is in beta testing.) Version 6.1 of StarOffice, also in beta testing, adds the ability to export files in PDF format, a macro recorder for automating repetitive tasks, and accessibility features for users with disabilities.

All in all, the package is a well-rounded, professional productivity suite. It is packed with useful features, stable, and (for the most part) compatible with your colleagues' files. If you're looking for an inexpensive alternative to Microsoft Office, Corel WordPerfect Office, and other pricey tools, StarOffice is an excellent — and inexpensive — option.

Kevin Savetz has been a freelance technology writer for a decade. Savetz's knowledge of small business technology has been published by The Washington Post, Computer Shopper, and The Rotarian. He is also the author of FAQ: How can I send a fax from the Internet?

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